

# THE MEASURE

## A JOURNAL OF POETRY



Poems by Orrick Johns, Elinor Wylie, Witter Bynner, Raymond Holden, and Mark Van Doren

Louise Bogan's "Body of This Death" Reviewed

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# The Measure

*A Journal of Poetry*

NUMBER 32

OCTOBER, 1923

## Country Rhymes

### I

**S**PADE and harrow, dark and dawn  
Make what all men live upon;  
Plowing knocks the plague o' man  
Sillier than praying can.

Cows that lift a cynic eye  
Know the measure of the sky;  
And a love that steals like dew  
Best may wet the lips of you.

### II

All around the world at night  
Above the horizon it is light . . .  
To see this you needs must lie  
On your back and face the sky.

To see this there needs must be  
Moonlight sharp behind a tree—  
What care, now, if all stars fall?  
Stars are your coverlet, that's all . . .

Fear not anything that's planet,  
This your bed can't hurt you, can it?

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## To a Brother

**S**OLITARY poplars stand  
Where, when moons were slim,  
I beneath the summer sky  
Talked with him.

'Round odd corners of the mind  
We came near to see  
Eye to eye beneath the moon  
And the poplar tree.

Yet when it was broad day  
Again and stillness flown,  
He and I in city streets  
Met with eyes of stone.

Now, where lonely poplars stand,  
If the moon be slim,  
I may go and speak my mind . . .  
But no word from him.

## Poet and Planter

**G**ROWING leaves are best for books,  
Libraries are something dead;  
Leaf of corn and leaf of rye!—  
*To be cooked, not read!*—

Here is print; the seeds that fall,  
They make prose of finer gold.—  
*Print that is not black and small*  
*May go wet and mold!*—

Fool, the poems of the earth  
Come with every spring afresh!—  
*Harvest's eaten . . . what's the worth?*  
*More unlovely flesh?*

—Orrick Johns

## Winter Woods

**S**WEET scents like startled hares,  
Caught leaf-hidden unawares,  
Quicken my nostril.  
Birch mushroom, wintergreen,  
The rotting acorn, mould-sheen  
And rose apple,  
Brown oak-fall and fern root,  
Stirred by my stumbling foot,  
Escape in the air.  
One instant, disinterred,  
Ripe summer, robed and myrrhed,  
Lives, and is gone.

—Ernestine Evans

## Crickets

**I**N indolent insistence  
The cricket rings his writhen bell;  
And other tunes he has as well;  
Small, strange star mimicry.

And the multitudinous delicacy  
Of grass blades dripping with the moon  
Echoes and echoes quietly  
The cricket's tune.

—*Kenneth Slade Alling.*

## Rain-Drenched

**T**HE fields are drenched in rain, the raindrops lie  
Upon the clover leaves like mercury,  
And on the grass blades; there are little chains  
Of diamonds on the sorrel, and the rains  
Have stuck together all the fingers white  
Of daisies, making them transparent, light  
As finest cambric: buttercups now hold  
Large broken raindrops on the burnished gold  
Of shining petals, and the dusty green  
Of timothy is covered with a sheen  
Of silver, while among the dripping flowers  
Fine grasses flattened by the thunder showers  
Are exquisite with moisture, like the thin  
And mantling webs the busy spiders spin.

—*Mary B. Miller*

## A Moonlight Night

*By Liu Fang-p'ing*

WHEN the moon has coloured half the house,  
With the North Star at its height and the South Star setting,  
I can feel the first approach of the warm air of spring  
In the singing of an insect at my green-silken window.

## From An Upper Story

*By Tu Fu*

The flowers, as high as my window, hurt my wandering heart,  
For I see, from this high vantage, sadness everywhere:  
The Silken River, bright with spring, floats between earth and  
heaven  
And a drift of cloud, by the Hill of Jade, between old days and now.  
The State for awhile is established, firm as the North Star,  
And bandits dare not venture forth from the western mountains;  
But, sorry for the Later Emperor of the Han Succession,  
I am singing in the twilight the Liang-Fu Song.

## Climbing in Autumn for a View from the Terrace at the Temple of Old Wu

*By Liu Chang-ch'ing*

WHAT the seasons have done to this ancient terrace,  
Autumn is doing to my homesick heart . . .  
Few pilgrims venture to a temple so wild,  
Up from the lake, in the mountain-clouds . . .  
With sunlight failing from the old defences,  
A stone-gong shivers through the empty woods . . .  
Of the Southern Dynasty, what remains?  
Nothing but the Great River.

—Translated by Witter Bynner and Kiang Kang-hu

## Enchanter's Handmaiden

SIR, it was not commanding me to climb  
The glassy hill, nor wring the bloody shirt;  
Such things are done in seven years' weary time,  
And the performer takes no mortal hurt . . . .  
(No, but it was giving me a netful of eels to turn into venison pasty!)

It was not bidding me to hold the brand  
White from the smithy, nor receive the lash  
Across my weeping; these to burn the hand  
And brow with different sort of lightning flash . . . .  
(No, but it was leaving me a stableful of straw to spin into golden  
mittens!)

It was not even binding down my wrists  
And ankles to a wheel in cruciform;  
I know your mills require many grists,  
And each but grinds subsistence for the worm . . . .  
(Oh, but it was making me suckle an imp after promising he was  
a Christian!)

—*Elinor Wylie.*

## Inarticulate

**G**OD, for a way of showing what men are.  
These soft-fleshed maggots crazy with clean flame,  
Rowelled, drunk, stumbling, stabbed by some dim star  
Gods broke by torture—how shall any name,  
Sound, color, marble, strike an image fit,  
To stand for him, or tell the half of it.

—Mold his mad grandeur to some pretty line,  
Shape half his foulness to a singing strain,  
Picture his flapping, bloody flesh divine.  
His courage flaring from the rack chain,  
Twisted, defeated, battling, bitter, dead,  
Dumb going on because he must be fed?

Man scourged to horror by eternal fear,  
Man cringing under pain implacable,  
Magnificence within him, year by year,  
Dragging out hope endured from hell to hell,  
Trampled and damned, whose triumph knows no bar—  
God, for a way of showing what men are.

## Fall

**W**INTER and Spring and Summer are this or that—  
A white old man, a girl, a drowsing tree.  
The Fall is a covered bridge that crosses the river  
Down from my father's house. The foam and the rocks  
Grow suddenly to a grey there, as the sky  
Returns one day to roof the valley in.  
The bridge's darkened mouth, so cool all summer,  
Gathers descending leaves; already warm there,  
The shadows settle to sleep, and a yellow cart,  
Flickering through the leaf-shower down the highway,  
Comes on with noiseless wheels and disappears.

—*Mark Van Doren*

# Legend

FOR L. B.

*Animula, vagula, blandula  
Hospes, comesque corporis . . .*

UNDER the subtle drift of dawn the cloud  
Stirs drop by drop from blade and leaf  
And the descended thickness of young grief  
Lightens and blows like smoke from the bowed  
Head that has never bent for loss before  
And now, being over-proud, bends more  
For shattered pride than for a broken house.  
The grass is silver wet. The mottled grouse  
Beats on the cool air and the wind-swept pine  
Shakes sea-sounds from it and drips crystal brine.  
Slowly the sharp ant crawls under the grass,  
Slowly the stalks swing at his little touch  
Striking against the ground-winds as they pass  
With no sound, never letting fall so much  
As one flake of round dew. The dawn at last,  
Swimming against the current of the night  
Up to lost windows where no longer light  
Can enter to attend love that has passed.  
The straight sweet body and the hands that slid  
Under small shoulders cool as leaves and held  
Breast against breast are now unspelled  
Of all their magic and the face is hid  
That once was quick with laughter under a mouth.  
This is the story. The young heart that learns  
Beginnings of a watered year learns drouth

Of the same fountain. The stalk burns  
Against the hand that reaches and, unchanged,  
Is ash when fingers close. And now estranged  
From the light ecstasy and inspired breath  
Of kind flesh, from the quickened side,  
The intolerable breast kissed near to death,  
The body sits and sees the dawn grow wide.  
It will be better when the sun is high  
Over the head of one who wished to die  
Rather than see where a hill sank in rain,  
A hill rise up and be round light again.  
It will be better. Men will come to the meadow  
And strike sound from their scythes. The grass will bend  
And fling a fine scent up against the shadow  
Of elms, fling it across the noon to end  
In a young throat where pain is beautiful.  
It will be better when the noon is full.  
Stone colored, stony shaped, the days run  
Their clattering gallop round the sun.  
There is nothing to do but hear  
Their grind. This was a long year.  
The cat upon the desolate fence screams out  
In bitterness and the rain gutters spout  
A colorless thick water. In December  
There should be snow, since eyes remember  
Leaves that were light upon the bough,  
But there is no snow now.  
This is no season, only a drifted heap  
Of fragments which unsharpened wind-whisks sweep  
From the deserted pavements of the past  
Where one danced whitely till the last  
Fire-fly had vanished from her hair

And the once gentle dark was a ploughshare  
Turning the cracked fallow of the brain  
Where voices fell, careless and cold as rain.  
This should be Winter, being the end  
Of a long year, and wires should bend  
Under a toothed and pinnacled weight  
Of white snow, and the late  
Wheels should be keen and loud  
And long white frost should ravel from a cloud.  
The heart has studied desire  
And learned how yesterday was fire  
Today ash and tomorrow scattering.  
The heart, like a shell in sand, a wing  
Of flightless bird, now is a closed fold  
Impervious alike to heat and cold.  
This because April suffers green to appear  
Upon the lilac and the birch that hear  
Echoes in April wind of what they are,  
Yet for some subtle magic of moon or star  
Brings frost upon a bitter breath  
And marks them for a black-edged death.  
Now the rain-gutters glitter with no ice,  
Spouting a rusty stream. The mice  
Are loud beneath the floors that are swept  
Morning and night, for order is not kept  
Within the mind of the hour and carefulness  
Is an old gate which the faintest press  
Of witless wind will open. The heart sleeps.  
Or is it dead or dumbly buried in the deeps  
Of a disillusioned mind that thought it knew  
Its name called when only a wind blew?

\* \* \*

Suddenly a light beyond the hill  
Showing the hill's shape and the place  
Toward which a lost road followed without will  
Leads. There is light and a lighted face.  
A word spoken and more than a word.  
A voice listened to and more than heard.

I was asleep and this is the waking.  
I was in a grave and the mound  
Of earth could not fall, hearing the sound  
Of living breath, crying to the aching  
Silence of burial, the voice the wide  
Unsheltered, unhelped, beautiful song of pride.

\* \* \*

This is no world for the recounting tongue  
So I fall silent, bend against your hands  
The head that being silent stands  
As inconsiderable as a small tree young  
In an old forest where the accustomed strike  
Of wind blows leaves from all alike.  
Things here are endless. Always the gray  
Flat pillar of the fallen tree and the shells  
Dropped from the round-eyed squirrels' paws, the bells  
Of thrushes rung from breath, the strong, slow sway  
Of crowned green over the sky and the song  
Of the earth to which these belong.

Things here have no beginning. Always you stood  
In this same beauty, always your hands  
Were here where something subtle understands  
Their shape, their gesture toward this wood.  
Always you were the beauty that I sought,  
Always the music and the thought.

I have come through a terrible place to come  
Here and have lost a burden supposed worth  
Bearing—have flung all things but love to earth  
Before you. I shall remember this green dome  
Of leaves and your face set upon their still  
Moment like the late sun upon a hill.

For you are gracious as the changed wind  
Playing cool music on the wires of the sun.  
You are the moment round which run  
The clouds of heaven and the shapes of the mind.  
You are the color by which light is known  
You are the breath and the body blown.  
Not the light color rippled over water and gone  
Suddenly, nor the flight of wild birds watched  
With personless strange joy, nor the unlatched  
Door closed behind the departing one.  
You are the deep shaped water of the sea  
And the sky fallen within it and left free.

Turn up the dry leaves with a few not curled  
And let them fall across the stir of warm air,  
Touch me with no more diligent care—  
For I, like them, have come upon your world  
After a Spring, a Summer, and an end,  
Asking nothing, guarding nothing, having nothing to defend.

—Raymond Holden

# The Measure & A Journal of Poetry

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## *Louise Bogan's Book*

*Body of This Death*, by Louise Bogan. Robert M. McBride and Company, New York.

THIS is a small and perfect book, a rich and rigid book, a nun's robe cut from tapestry. Here is colored purity, gorgeous austerity, passion and mind made white reflectors to blind the eye. Refraction, deflection, are words which ask, with however vague a claim to accuracy, to be used as qualitative. This is individual, over and above the refraction which goes on whenever life is transmuted, deflected, into art. The light in these poems is comparable to the light which fairy-stories take on through constant straining and restraining through the minds of children—a light as bright and strange as in life itself. This, however, may be a most misleading thing to say, since fairy-stories and children's minds, as usually accepted, have nothing whatever to do with Louise Bogan's work.

If it did not sound like jacket-cover writing, I would say that there is no doubt that she is one of the best American women poets; this is true, but although the truth isn't always unpleasant, the words and phrases for it often are. There will be comparison of her soon with Elinor Wylie, with Edna St. Vincent Millay, probably with Emily Dickinson, possibly with Adelaide Crapsey; I don't have to do that now. She will keep on writing poetry. I hope that she will

also write prose, that finest prose which only poets write. She has to such a degree the power of putting into lyrics the individual and typical psychology of women, of men, and of their relationships, that I can think of no other poet who can approach it; and I want to see this elaborated, in the kind of novels Viola Meynell has written in England, and which nobody has written here.

She has, remarkably, her own idiom. See, for example, "Chanson un peu naïve";

What body can be ploughed,  
Sown, and broken yearly?  
She would not die, she vowed,  
But she has, nearly.  
Sing, heart, sing;  
Call and carol clearly.

And, since she could not die,  
Care would be a feather,  
A film over the eye  
Of two that lie together.  
Fly, song, fly,  
Break your little tether.

So from strength concealed  
She makes her pretty boast:  
Pain is a furrow healed  
And she may love you most.  
Cry, song, cry,  
And hear your crying lost.

"Memory" is another example:

Do not guard this as rich stuff without mark  
Closed in a cedarn dark,  
Nor lay it down with tragic masks and greaves,  
Licked by the tongues of leaves.

Nor let it be as eggs under the wings  
Of helpless, startled things,  
Nor encompassed by song, nor any glory  
Perverse and transitory.

Rather, like shards and straw upon coarse ground,  
Of little worth when found,—  
Rubble in gardens, it and stones alike,  
That any spade may strike.

These clocks of hers do more than strike—they are like those exquisitely slender yet sturdy Colonial ones which also show, in a minimum of space, the movements of the seasons and the moon.

The book is a sample, a suggestion, complete though it is. There must be more, not only of lyrics, but also of that looser, flowing stuff which is in "A Letter" and which is more rare with her. It is too long to quote. This is a part of it:

This is a countryside of roofless houses,—  
Taverns to rain,—doorsteps of millstones, lintels  
Leaning and delicate, foundations sprung to lilacs,  
Orchards where boughs like roots strike into the sky.  
Here I could well devise the journey to nothing,  
At night getting down from the wagon by the black barns,  
The zenith a point of darkness, breaking to bits,  
Showering motionless stars over the houses—  
Scenes relentless—the black and white grooves of a woodcut.

And here are a couple of the lines of it:

Let arrogant pain lick my flesh with a tongue  
Rough as a cat's;

and

The farmer's wife stands with a halo of darkness  
Rounding her head.

There is a beautiful freeness in "Words for Departure," the end of which is:

But at the end, be insolent;  
Be absurd—strike the thing short off;  
Be mad—only do not let talk  
Wear the bloom from silence.

And go away without fire or lantern.  
Let there be some uncertainty about your departure.

"The Frightened Man," "Men Loved Wholly Beyond Wisdom," and "Women" are perhaps the best examples of her men and women poems—some of her titles, her phrases, seem to be true enough, startling enough, to become catchwords, slang. I will quote the last of these three:

Women have no wilderness in them,  
They are provident instead,  
Content in the tight hot cell of their hearts  
To eat dusty bread.

They do not see cattle cropping red winter grass,  
They do not hear  
Snow water going down under culverts  
Shallow and clear.

They wait, when they should turn to journeys,  
They stiffen, when they should bend.  
They use against themselves that benevolence  
To which no man is friend.

They cannot think of so many crops to a field  
Or of clean wood cleft by an axe.  
Their love is an eager meaninglessness  
Too tense, too lax.

They hear in every whisper that speaks to them  
A shout and a cry.  
As like as not, when they take life over their door-sills  
They should let it go by.

“Decoration” and “Medusa,” which are both, I think, earlier work, are of a different kind though not a different quality. The first of these is:

A macaw preens upon a branch outspread  
With jewelry of seed. He's deaf and mute.  
The sky behind him splits like gorgeous fruit  
And claw-like leaves clutch light till it has bled.  
The raw diagonal bounty of his wings  
Scraps on the eye color too chafed. He beats  
A flattered tail out against gauzy heats;  
He has the frustrate look of cheated kings.  
And all the simple evening passes by:  
A gillyflower spans its little height  
And lovers with their mouths press out their grief.  
The bird fans wide his striped regality  
Prismatic, while against a sky breath-white  
A crystal tree lets fall a crystal leaf.

There are some poems about which nothing at all must be said, the poems which are at the heart of a book, which are its core and its consummation. One of these is “The Alchemist”:

I burned my life, that I might find  
A passion wholly of the mind,  
Thought divorced from eye and bone,  
Ecstasy come to breath alone.  
I broke my life, to seek relief  
From the flawed light of love and grief.

With mounting beat the utter fire  
Charred existence and desire.  
It died low, ceased its sudden thresh.  
I had found unmysterious flesh—  
Not the mind's avid substance—still  
Passionate beyond the will.

The other is the second of two sonnets called "Fifteenth Farewell":

I erred, when I thought loneliness the wide  
Scent of mown grass over forsaken fields,  
Or any shadow isolation yields.  
Loneliness was the heart within your side.  
Your thought, beyond my touch, was tilted air  
Ringed with as many borders as the wind.  
How could I judge you gentle or unkind  
When all bright flying space was in your care?

Now that I leave you, I shall be made lonely  
By simple empty days,—never that chill  
Resonant heart to strike within my arms  
Again, as though distraught for distance,—only  
Levels of evening, now, behind a hill,  
Or a late cock-crow from the darkening farms.

—Louise Townsend Nicholl

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## CONTRIBUTORS

ORRICK JOHNS, best known perhaps for the Country Rhymes in his first book, "Asphalt," is now in New York.

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ELINOR WYLIE'S new book, *Jennifer Lorn*, will be out in a few weeks, and is looked forward to as the novels of poets always are.

MARK VAN DOREN, critic and poet, is now teaching in Columbia University. He has two books, on Thoreau and on Dryden, published.

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# The Measure

*A Journal of Poetry*

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